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APPLYMEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

OSD Review Completed Pgs 2-6 ONLY.

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger
SUBJECT: Background on U.S. Military Operations in Laos

Secretary Laird has sent you a memorandum (Tab A) which sets forth U.S. military operations in Laos, and also outlines the relative strengths of the Communist and Lao Government forces. It notes that enemy and friendly strengths are roughly the same (105,595 and 98,230, respectively, as of April 1969, including the North Vietnamese component), and that 120,000 air attack sorties have been flown this year by U.S. and Laotian aircraft. It goes on to suggest, however, that the availability of North Vietnamese manpower gives the Communists the edge despite our air power and that the Communists can also match our upgrading of Lao Government weaponry. The conclusion is that a greater U.S. effort may not alter the power balance substantially.

Since the memorandum's purpose was to describe the situation solely in military terms, it did not go into the politico/military implications of an enemy dry-season offensive which now appears to be building up. If the Communist forces should advance in North Laos significantly beyond the limits reached in previous years, they would threaten to undermine the long-established but precarious balance of Prince Souvanna Phouma's neutral government. If this government should collapse, we would lose the justification for our attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, since we are operating at Souvanna's request. Alternatively, if Souvanna should attempt to salvage his position by reaching an accord with the Communists, we might be actually ordered by him to stop bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Communists have consistently demanded this as the price of removing North Vietnamese troops from Laos. In either case, Communist forces would undoubtedly advance to the line of the Mekong.

It is to counter the sort of situation which I have just described that the Washington Special Action Group has recommended, and you have approved the implementation of military measures designed to strengthen the Lao Government forces.

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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

OSD Review Completed

- HK-D9462

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: US Military Operations in Laos (S)

In light of the current Congressional and public interest in US military operations in Laos, you may find some additional background information useful. This report deals separately with the two military theaters in Laos. The first is in the Southern Panhandle where US air operations and Laotian ground forces are attempting to interdict enemy infiltration into South Vietnam. The second theater is in Northern Laos, particularly in the eastern and central parts where the terrain is mountainous and the area is thinly populated. Since the Geneva Accords in 1962, the Communists have effectively controlled about 40% of the territory and 25% of the population in Laos. The degree of Communist control has fluctuated in response to the seasonal ebb and flow pattern of the military conflict. During the dry season, beginning in October and ending in March, the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces have historically launched an offensive. The Royal Laotian Government (RLG) forces counterattack during the wet season from May to September and generally regain the positions they held the previous year.

At present there are an estimated 100,000 enemy troops in Laos. About half of the total forces are Pathet Lao insurgents and half are regular North Vietnamese troops and advisors. The RLG has about 100,000 men under arms including regulars of the Royal Laotian (Conservative) and former Neutralist Armies, an air force of 53 T-28s and some other planes, a river flotilla, and an irregular guerrilla army. The current strength of the irregular guerrilla army is about 38,000 men, or nearly 40% of total Laotian armed forces. The guerrilla units are generally regarded as highly effective combat forces and do much of the actual fighting. A large part of this force is composed of Meo tribesmen living in the main areas of conflict. The table below summarizes the troop strength of both sides (exclusive of any US military personnel) in 1968 and 1969.

ESTIMATED ENEMY/FRIENDLY STRENGTHS IN LAOS

	July-August 1968		April 1969	
	Friendly	Enemy	Friendly	Enemy
Combat Forces	58,255	57,690	56,964	55,745
Command & Support	48,245	42,850	41,266	49,850
Total	106,500	100,540	98,230	105,595

SOURCE: DIA

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While the sides appear evenly matched, both in combat forces and support personnel, the US military and intelligence community has long recognized that the enemy could rapidly increase their forces in Laos and occupy large sections of friendly territory if they desired. They have probably not done so to date because the ebb and flow of the fighting in Laos since 1962 has provided the North Vietnamese relatively easy access to South Vietnam through Laos at a minimum cost in men and materiel. They were probably also anxious to avoid an escalation of the conflict in Laos merely to achieve objectives secondary to their basic aims in South Vietnam.

The enemy strength of about 100,000 in mid-1968 was almost 30,000 troops (40%) larger than the previous year and there is reason to believe the North Vietnamese could sustain even larger forces and casualties. The PL/NVA forces currently lose about 8500 men per year in Laos from all causes and the RLG loses about 5500. About 120,000 physically fit males in North Vietnam and about 4000 Laotians under Communist control in Laos reach the draft age each year. This annual flow of men combined with the large (900,000 men) surplus labor pool in North Vietnam is sufficient to sustain the enemy's losses in Laos and its requirements for infiltration into South Vietnam. Our Laotian allies can easily replace their losses from the 12,000 physically fit males entering the draft age each year and the reserve pool of 150,000 men under their control. Two conclusions emerge from these figures. First, both sides can sustain the present level of combat almost indefinitely. Second, the government forces can never hope to gain numerical superiority over the enemy from its own reserves of manpower.

Based on recent combat activity on the ground and in the air over Laos, the war in Laos has been intensifying. So far this year US and Laotian aircraft have flown about 120,000 attack sorties over Laos (one-third in the northern sector). On the other hand, they flew only 79,000 in all of 1968 (about 20% in the North) and 52,000 in 1966. The following table shows the monthly attack sorties during 1966-1969.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF ATTACK SORTIES PER MONTH
IN LAOS

	Northern Laos				Southern Laos		Total
	RIAF	%	US	%	US	%	
1966	355	8	513	12	3461	80	4329
1967	601	14	458	11	3246	75	4305
1968	300 ^{a/}	5	908	14	5352	81	6560
1969 (thru July)	1600 ^{a/}	12	2796	20	9373	68	13769

^{a/} Estimated from incomplete monthly data.

By way of comparison, during the bombing campaign over North Vietnam, the US flew about 9000 attack sorties per month. The US and Laotian air forces are now flying half that many just in Northern Laos at an annual cost to the US of \$370 million per year (including \$43 million in MASF funds).

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In the ground war, enemy and friendly initiated actions have more than doubled during the recent wet season campaign and increased by almost one-third in the most recent annual cycle. The table below also shows that the enemy took the initiative away from the government forces during the last year (the enemy initiated 57% of all actions in the 1968-1969 period compared to 47% in the previous year).

AVERAGE NUMBER OF GROUND COMBAT ACTIONS PER WEEK

	<u>1967- 1968</u>	<u>1968- 1969</u>	<u>% Change</u>
<u>Enemy Initiated</u>			
Dry Season	16	15	-6
Wet Season	<u>11</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>155</u>
Total	<u>27</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>59</u>
<u>Friendly Initiated</u>			
Dry Season	19	12	-37
Wet Season	<u>12</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>67</u>
Total	<u>31</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Total</u>			
Dry Season	35	27	-23
Wet Season	<u>23</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>109</u>
Total	<u>58</u>	<u>75</u>	<u>29</u>

SOURCE: Laos Ground Operations Summary (OPREP 5).

Two other facts about the war in Laos are important. First, only 2% of the total ground actions received air support (compared to 5% in 1968) even though US and Laotian pilots are flying nearly 150 attack sorties per day over Northern Laos. Second, the combat performance of the Laotian regular forces appears to be at about the same level as that of the Popular Forces in South Vietnam that guard local villages and hamlets from the VC. Both have a kill ratio of about 3 (the ratio of enemy to friendly killed and captured). By contrast, the kill ratio of US units in South Vietnam is 12, that of the ARVN is 7, and of the Regional Forces is 5. If the Laotian Army is to become a force comparable in effectiveness to the Vietnamese regular forces, these figures indicate that more than a doubling in combat performance will be necessary.

The issue of American involvement in Laos and its current cost also should be considered. About 200 American military personnel are in Laos now.

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ESTIMATED INCREMENTAL COST OF THE WAR IN LAOS^{a/}
(\$ Millions)

	<u>North</u>	<u>South</u>	<u>Total</u>
25X1 <u>Air Operations (US)</u>			
Attack Sorties	292	1015	1307
Recce & Other Sorties	36	233	269
B-52 Sorties	-	241	241
Total Air	<u>328</u>	<u>1489</u>	<u>1817</u>
25X1 <div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 20px; width: 100%;"></div>			
<u>US Military Personnel</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>1</u>
Total	469	1489	1958

a/ These costs are consistent with the current incremental cost of the war in Southeast Asia of \$17.6 billion.

Air operations account for 95% of the cost of the war in Laos (about 80% of the war cost in Northern Laos). About one-quarter of the \$2 billion that we have committed to Laos is allocated to Northern Laos.

The provision of additional US arms, equipment, and advisory personnel in Laos undoubtedly will increase the intensity of the military conflict. Because of the inevitable delay in providing additional equipment and getting it into operation, the short-run impact is likely to be very small in light of enemy capabilities during the current dry season. With the possible exception of M-16 rifles, at least several weeks will be required for the provision of additional arms and equipment. Getting the equipment operational in the field will involve further delays. The dry season is about to begin in Laos, at which time the PL/NVA forces probably will regain the initiative. Opposition to RLG operations has increased significantly in the last few days. Intelligence sources indicate that up to a full North Vietnamese division (over 9500 troops) is headed toward the battle areas in Northern Laos. The RLG troops are spread thin and currently are holding unfamiliar and hostile territory. The general consensus of the US military and intelligence community appears to be that the North Vietnamese/Pathet Lao forces can retake substantial areas of Northern Laos in the next few months if they desire. The immediate dispatch of additional US arms and advisors will have little impact in stopping a renewed enemy offensive.

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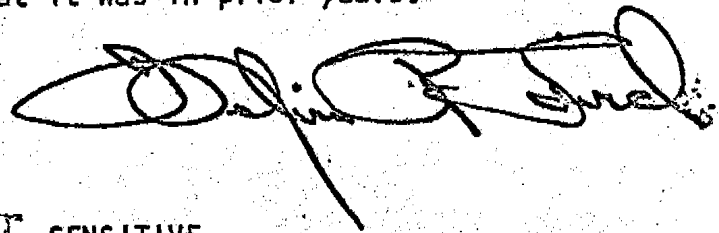
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The longer-term impact of additional US assistance is more difficult to identify. Modern equipment will increase the combat capability of the RLG forces and US advisors may be able to improve the training and motivation of the Laotian troops. Whether or not this type of assistance would improve appreciably the military and political position of the Royal Laotian Government in the long run is doubtful.

The North Vietnamese have the capability (as they have demonstrated numerous times in South Vietnam) to match US arms escalations by introducing more sophisticated equipment, rockets, AK-47s and armed vehicles. They also have sufficient manpower reserves to sustain the current level of losses almost indefinitely and to match any increase in combat force within the capability of the Laotians. An arms escalation probably will increase just the intensity of the fighting and the casualties on both sides without significantly improving the military control or the political influence of the RLG. The escalation in combat activity in Northern Laos in 1968 and 1969 has not improved the RLG position significantly over what it was in prior years. Control of the infiltration system in Laos is critical to North Vietnamese objectives in South Vietnam, and little doubt exists that they are willing to allocate the relatively small amounts of troops and equipment needed to protect these vital interests.

I am also not convinced that we have fully explored the risks associated with providing additional US personnel in Laos to operate (or train Laotian forces to operate) the sophisticated new equipment. Recent Congressional and public discontent with our current level of involvement in Laos would probably increase significantly with any commitment of additional arms and military personnel.

I have asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to provide me with detailed reports on the implications of increased military assistance to Laos. Their analyses of cost and personnel increases required by the proposals for immediate shipments of additional arms and equipment will be available prior to October 20, and their comprehensive program for the improvement of the Royal Laotian Armed Forces (and its implications in terms of cost and manpower increases) late in October or early in November. We will be in a better position to make sound judgments on these issues after their review, but I do not believe, in any event, that additional US advisors and military personnel should be sent to Laos at this time. Besides increasing Congressional and public discontent with our involvement there, expansion of our military presence in Laos will only escalate the level of combat without improving the long-run position of the RLG. This has been demonstrated in Vietnam and in Laos where the fighting already has escalated significantly in the last year without any important change in the RLG position over what it was in prior years.

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